

The moderating role of insight in the relationship between object relations and defense mechanisms in adults

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ABSTRACT

Aims: This study investigates the moderating role of insight in the association between object relational patterns and defense mechanisms among adults. Grounded in psychoanalytic object relations theory, the research underscores the lasting influence of early relational experiences on the formation of self-structure and defensive functioning.

Methods: The sample comprised 412 adult volunteers aged between 18 and 65, with individuals reporting psychiatric diagnoses excluded from participation. Participants completed the Bell Object Relations and Reality Testing Inventory (BORRTI), the Insight Scale, and the Defense Styles Test-40. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS 27.0 and Hayes' PROCESS Macro v4.2 (model 1). Correlational analyses were performed alongside moderation analyses to assess whether insight modulates the relationship between object relations and defense mechanisms—specifically immature, neurotic, and mature defenses.

Results: Correlational results indicated that higher levels of pathological object relational features were significantly associated with lower insight. Moreover, immature defense styles were positively correlated with dimensions such as egocentricity and social incompetence. Moderation analyses revealed that insight significantly buffered the effect of both egocentricity ($B=-0.10$, $p=.003$) and social incompetence ($B=-0.17$, $p=.004$) on the use of immature defenses. No significant moderation effects emerged in relation to neurotic or mature defense mechanisms. Interaction plots illustrated that as insight increased, the influence of maladaptive object relations on immature defenses diminished.

Conclusion: The findings suggest that insight functions as a psychological resource that may attenuate the reliance on primitive defense mechanisms in the presence of pathological object relational patterns. These results point to the potential clinical value of fostering insight within psychoanalytic psychotherapy, as doing so may contribute to the development of more adaptive defense functioning and improved psychological integration. Enhancing insight may thus serve as a pivotal intervention target in efforts to interrupt maladaptive relational-defensive cycles.

Keywords: Object relations, defense mechanisms, insight, psychoanalytic therapy

INTRODUCTION

Object relations theory is one of the foundational psychoanalytic approaches, emphasizing the enduring influence of early life experiences—particularly those involving primary caregivers—on the development of the self and the individual's psychological structure.^{1,2} This theoretical framework posits that individuals construct their self-structure through the internalization of object representations, which exert lasting effects on subsequent interpersonal relationships via self-perception and defense mechanisms.

Defense mechanisms are conceptualized within a developmental hierarchy and are typically classified as immature (primitive), neurotic, or mature (adaptive), based on the hierarchical model proposed by Vaillant.⁴ The deployment and quality of these defenses vary depending on

the individual's level of psychological functioning, reality-testing capacity, and affect regulation abilities.

Pathological or dysfunctional object relations may predispose individuals to rely on more primitive defense mechanisms, whereas coherent and healthy internal object representations are more likely to facilitate the use of mature and adaptive defenses.^{5,6} Kramer et al.⁷ conducted a study demonstrating that changes in defense mechanisms and coping strategies during short-term dynamic psychotherapy progressed positively, particularly as the therapeutic alliance improved. Although this study indirectly refers to object relations, it clarifies the process associated with the quality of defensive functioning. Within this framework, insight emerges as a critical construct that may function as a moderating bridge between object relational patterns and defensive functioning.

Insight is broadly defined as the individual's capacity to comprehend and integrate emotional, cognitive, and behavioral experiences.⁸ It plays a pivotal role in both self-perception and interpersonal dynamics.

In psychotherapeutic contexts, an enhancement in the level of insight facilitates the recognition of maladaptive defense patterns and supports their replacement with more adaptive forms.⁹ Empirical evidence provided by Roten and colleagues¹⁰ suggests that individuals with higher levels of insight exhibit a significant reduction in primitive defenses such as projection and splitting, and a corresponding increase in the use of mature defenses such as repression, humor, and idealization.

In this context, it can be suggested that insight may play a significant moderating role in the relationship between object relations and defense mechanisms. Particularly in personality structures characterized by a predominance of primitive defenses and lower developmental maturity, enhancing the level of insight may have a meaningful impact on psychological functioning. This perspective holds importance not only at a theoretical level but also in terms of clinical application. Within the psychotherapeutic process, fostering the individual's capacity for insight can serve as a fundamental intervention target for restructuring the defensive repertoire.

The present study investigates the moderating role of insight in the relationship between object relational patterns and defense mechanisms in adults. The main hypothesis of the study posits that maladaptive object relations are associated with more primitive defense mechanisms, whereas healthier object relations are related to neurotic or mature defenses. Furthermore, it is assumed that insight may attenuate this relationship and act as a protective factor in terms of psychological resilience.

Although object relations and defense mechanisms have been extensively addressed within psychoanalytic theory, empirical studies examining the moderating role of insight in the relationship between these two variables remain markedly limited. Most existing research has explored these constructs independently or within linear models, often overlooking the potential contribution of higher-order reflective capacities. While previous studies have shown that mature levels of insight are associated with more adaptive defensive functioning and healthier object relational structures, very few have tested these variables within an interactive framework. Specifically, whether insight can buffer or transform the impact of maladaptive object relations on the organization of defense mechanisms has received little empirical attention. This gap in the literature underscores the importance and originality of the current study, which integrates three clinically and theoretically central constructs—object relations, defense mechanisms, and insight—within a unified model. By testing the moderating role of insight, the present research contributes not only to a more comprehensive understanding of intrapsychic dynamics but also offers clinically relevant implications for the development of intervention strategies tailored to individuals' levels of reflective functioning.

METHODS

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Ethics Committee of Ankara Hacı Bayram Veli University (Date: 30.05.2025, Decision No: 355042). All procedures were conducted in accordance with established ethical standards and the principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki. The research aimed to explore the moderating role of insight in the relationship between patterns of object relations and defense mechanisms among adults aged 18 to 65, with participation based entirely on informed consent.

Employing a quantitative, correlational survey design, the study sought to identify both direct and interactive relationships among the variables. To this end, Hayes' PROCESS macro was utilized for statistical modeling. The sample consisted of 412 participants, including 248 women and 164 men. Individuals who reported a prior psychiatric diagnosis were excluded from participation to ensure the integrity of the psychological constructs under investigation.

Data collection tools included a demographic information form, the Bell Object Relations and Reality Testing Inventory (BORRTI),¹¹ the Insight Scale,¹² and the Defense Mechanisms Test.¹³

Statistical Analysis

The data analyses were carried out using IBM SPSS Statistics version 27. Pearson's product-moment correlation was applied to examine bivariate relationships between variables, provided the assumptions of parametric testing were met.

To address the study's primary hypothesis, moderation analysis was performed to test whether the effect of object relational variables (independent variables) on defense mechanisms (dependent variables) varied as a function of insight (moderating variable). For this purpose, Model 1 of Hayes'¹⁴ PROCESS Macro version 4.2 was employed. This model allows for the examination of interaction effects by testing whether the relationship between an independent variable (X) and a dependent variable (Y) is contingent upon a third variable (Z).

Within this framework, interaction terms ($X \times Z$) were computed and included in the regression model to evaluate their statistical significance. The significance of the moderation effect was assessed using the bootstrap resampling method with 5,000 samples at a 95% confidence level. A moderating effect was considered statistically significant if the bias-corrected confidence intervals did not include zero.

Measurement Instruments

Sociodemographic form: A sociodemographic data form developed by the researcher was used to collect basic participant information. This form included items related to participants' age, gender, marital status, perceived income level, educational background, and psychiatric diagnosis history.

Bell Object Relations and Reality Testing Inventory (BORRTI): Originally developed by Bell,¹⁵ the BORRTI

was adapted into Turkish by Uluç et al.¹¹ who conducted its validity and reliability studies for the Turkish population. The inventory consists of 90 dichotomous (true/false) items, equally distributed between two major domains: object relations (45 items) and reality testing (45 items). For the purposes of this study, only the object relations dimension and its four subscales—alienation, insecure attachment, egocentrism, and social inadequacy—were utilized. Reported Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients for the object relations subscales ranged from .70 to .80, whereas reliability coefficients for the reality testing subscales were between .54 and .77.

Insight Scale: The Insight Scale was developed by Akdoğan and Türküm¹² to assess individuals' capacity for psychological insight. The scale comprises 20 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale and includes three subscales. Internal consistency coefficients for the subscales were reported as .80, .69, and .78, respectively. Higher scores reflect greater levels of insight. The overall internal consistency coefficient (Cronbach's alpha) for the full scale was found to be .84.

Defense Styles Test-40: The Defense Styles Test-40, adapted into Turkish by Yılmaz et al.,¹³ consists of 40 items and categorizes defense styles into three domains: mature, neurotic, and immature. The internal consistency coefficients (Cronbach's alpha) for these subscales were .70 for mature defenses, .61 for neurotic defenses, and .83 for immature defenses, indicating acceptable to high levels of reliability.

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics for the participant sample are presented in **Table 1**. In terms of gender distribution, 60.2% of the participants were female (n=248), and 39.8% were male (n=164). Age distribution revealed that 35.4% (n=146) were between 18–30 years, 34.2% (n=141) were aged 31–45, 18.9% (n=78) were between 45–60, and 11.4% (n=47) were 61 years or older. Regarding educational attainment, the majority of participants were university graduates (57.8%, n=238), followed by those with a master's degree (17.0%, n=70), high

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for sociodemographic variables

Sociodemographic variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Female	248	60.2
	Male	164	39.8
Age	18–30	146	35.4
	31–45	141	34.2
	45–60	78	18.9
	61 and above	47	11.4
Educational level	Primary education	22	5.3
	High school	58	14.1
	Undergraduate	238	57.8
	Master's degree	70	17.0
Marital status	Doctorate	24	5.8
	Single	214	51.9
Employment status	Married	198	48.1
	No	61	14.8
Perceived income level	Yes	351	85.2
	Low	174	42.2
	Moderate	153	37.1
	High	85	20.6
Total		412	100.0

school education (14.1%, n=58), doctoral degree (5.8%, n=24), and primary school education (5.3%, n=22). Marital status data showed that 51.9% (n=214) were single, while 48.1% (n=198) were married. Employment status indicated that 85.2% (n=351) of participants were employed, whereas 14.8% (n=61) were not. When examining perceived income levels, 42.2% (n=174) identified their income as low, 37.1% (n=153) as moderate, and 20.6% (n=85) as high.

Descriptive statistics and reliability analyses of the scales used in the study are provided in **Table 2**. The internal consistency values (Cronbach's alpha) of the BORRTI, the Insight Scale, and the Defense Mechanisms Test ranged between .71 and .94 across subdimensions. These coefficients exceed the commonly

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for the measurement tools

Scale and subdimensions	Min	Max	Mean ($\bar{X}$)	SD	Kurtosis	Skewness	α
BORRTI–alienation	0	22	6.00	4.57	0.55	1.06	0.85
BORRTI–insecure attachment	0	15	5.87	3.55	-0.37	0.49	0.79
BORRTI–egocentricity	0	12	3.91	2.86	-0.27	0.63	0.78
BORRTI–social incompetence	0	6	1.47	1.79	0.39	1.22	0.80
BORRTI–reality distortion	0	11	2.36	2.41	1.86	1.39	0.71
BORRTI–uncertainty of perception	0	10	2.10	2.12	1.71	1.41	0.71
BORRTI–hallucinations and delusions	0	9	1.73	2.04	0.46	1.13	0.71
Insight scale	20	90	38.21	16.67	1.10	1.38	0.94
Holistic perspective	7	33	14.43	6.41	0.71	1.16	0.82
Self-acceptance	7	32	11.80	5.72	1.42	1.49	0.83
Self-understanding	6	29	11.97	5.55	0.68	1.19	0.81
DMI–immature defenses	25	198	96.55	32.30	0.04	0.39	0.88
DMI–neurotic defenses	8	69	35.77	13.08	-0.14	0.00	0.78
DMI–mature defenses	8	71	35.69	12.59	0.02	-0.05	0.75

Min: Minimum, Max: Maximum, SD: Standard deviation, BORRTI: Bell Object Relations and Reality Testing Inventory, DMI: Defense Mechanisms Inventory

accepted reliability threshold of .70, indicating strong internal consistency.¹⁵ In terms of normality, skewness values ranged from -0.37 to 1.49, and kurtosis values ranged from -0.14 to 1.86, all within the acceptable ± 2 range, suggesting that the variables were normally distributed.

Pearson correlation analysis results are displayed in **Table 3**. The analysis revealed significant negative correlations between insight and the pathological object relations dimensions. Specifically, alienation ($r=-.38$, $p<.01$), insecure attachment ($r=-.37$, $p<.01$), egocentrism ($r=-.33$, $p<.01$), and social inadequacy ($r=-.28$, $p<.01$) were moderately negatively correlated with Insight. Similarly, negative correlations were observed between Insight and the reality testing dimensions: reality of distortion ($r=-.15$, $p<.01$), uncertainty of perception ($r=-.17$, $p<.01$), and hallucinations and delusions ($r=-.19$, $p<.01$).

Subdimensions of the Insight Scale, namely Holistic View, Self-Acceptance, and self-understanding, exhibited similar patterns. Holistic View showed moderate negative correlations with alienation ($r=-.41$, $p<.01$), insecure attachment ($r=-.39$, $p<.01$), egocentrism ($r=-.35$, $p<.01$), and social inadequacy ($r=-.30$, $p<.01$); and weak negative correlations with reality of distortion ($r=-.15$, $p<.01$), uncertainty of perception ($r=-.18$, $p<.01$), and hallucinations and delusions ($r=-.20$, $p<.01$). self-acceptance was weakly negatively correlated with alienation ($r=-.31$, $p<.01$), insecure attachment ($r=-.31$, $p<.01$), egocentrism ($r=-.26$, $p<.01$), and social inadequacy ($r=-.23$, $p<.01$); and slightly correlated with the reality testing dimensions. Similarly, self-understanding was moderately negatively correlated with alienation ($r=-.35$, $p<.01$), insecure attachment ($r=-.33$, $p<.01$), egocentrism ($r=-.32$, $p<.01$), and

weakly with social inadequacy ($r=-.27$, $p<.01$), reality of distortion ($r=-.14$, $p<.01$), uncertainty of perception ($r=-.16$, $p<.01$), and hallucinations and delusions ($r=-.19$, $p<.01$).

Regarding defense mechanisms, alienation was positively correlated with immature ($r=.46$, $p<.01$) and neurotic defenses ($r=.44$, $p<.01$), and negatively correlated with mature defenses ($r=-.24$, $p<.01$). Insecure attachment and egocentrism demonstrated similar patterns, being moderately positively correlated with immature and neurotic defenses, and negatively associated with mature defenses at low to moderate levels. Social inadequacy, reality of distortion, uncertainty of perception, and hallucinations and delusions were generally weakly positively associated with immature and neurotic defenses and weakly negatively associated with mature defenses.

Furthermore, immature defenses were negatively associated with total insight ($r=-.34$, $p<.01$), holistic view ($r=-.36$, $p<.01$), self-acceptance ($r=-.28$, $p<.01$), and self-understanding ($r=-.30$, $p<.01$). Neurotic defenses also showed low-level negative correlations with these variables. By contrast, mature defenses demonstrated low positive correlations with Insight ($r=.16$, $p<.05$), holistic view ($r=.18$, $p<.01$), self-acceptance ($r=.11$, $p<.05$), and self-understanding ($r=.15$, $p<.01$).

The results of the moderation analysis examining the moderating role of insight in the relationship between object relations and defense mechanisms are presented in **Table 4**. Analyses were conducted separately for immature, neurotic, and mature defense dimensions.

Within the immature defenses model, a significant interaction effect was observed between egocentrism and insight

Table 3. Correlation matrix between scale subdimensions

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. BORRTI-alienation	1.00													
2. BORRTI-insecure attachment	.85**	1.00												
3. BORRTI-egocentricity	.81**	.80**	1.00											
4. BORRTI-social incompetence	.80**	.65**	.56**	1.00										
5. BORRTI-reality distortion	.37**	.39**	.39**	.29**	1.00									
6. BORRTI-uncertainty of perception	.40**	.38**	.32**	.37**	.67**	1.00								
7. BORRTI-hallucinations & delusions	.49**	.51**	.50**	.37**	.77**	.55**	1.00							
8. Insight scale	-.38**	-.37**	-.33**	-.28**	-.15**	-.17**	-.19**	1.00						
9. Holistic perspective	-.41**	-.39**	-.35**	-.30**	-.15**	-.18**	-.20**	.95**	1.00					
10. Self-acceptance	-.31**	-.31**	-.26**	-.23**	-.13**	-.15**	-.15**	.94**	.85**	1.00				
11. Self-understanding	-.35**	-.33**	-.32**	-.27**	-.14**	-.16**	-.19**	.93**	.83**	.82**	1.00			
12. DMI-immature defenses	.46**	.45**	.38**	.30**	.22**	.25**	.32**	-.34**	-.36**	-.28**	-.30**	1.00		
13. DMI-neurotic defenses	.44**	.47**	.42**	.29**	.21**	.23**	.32**	-.27**	-.29**	-.24**	-.23**	.66**	1.00	
14. DMI-mature defenses	-.24**	-.25**	-.30**	-.16**	-.11*	-.15**	-.19**	.16**	.18**	.11*	.15**	-.27**	-.21**	1.00

BORRTI: Bell Object Relations and Reality Testing Inventory; DMI: Defense Mechanisms Inventory. ** $p<.01$

Table 4. The moderating role of insight in the relationship between object relations and defense mechanisms

Dependent variable	Interaction effect	B	SE	t	p	95% CI lower	95% CI upper
Immature defenses							
	Alienation×insight	−0.03	0.02	−1.65	.099	−0.07	0.01
	Insecure attachment×insight	−0.04	0.03	−1.77	.078	−0.09	0.01
	Egocentricity×insight	−0.10	0.03	−2.95	.003**	−0.16	−0.03
	Social incompetence×insight	−0.17	0.06	−2.90	.004**	−0.28	−0.05
Neurotic defenses							
	Alienation×insight	0.00	0.01	0.50	.613	−0.01	0.02
	Insecure attachment×insight	0.00	0.01	0.32	.751	−0.02	0.02
	Egocentricity×insight	−0.01	0.01	−0.52	.603	−0.03	0.02
	Social incompetence×insight	−0.02	0.02	−0.63	.527	−0.06	0.03
Mature defenses							
	Alienation×insight	0.01	0.01	0.95	.341	−0.01	0.03
	Insecure attachment×insight	0.02	0.01	1.64	.103	−0.03	0.04
	Egocentricity×insight	0.02	0.02	1.43	.153	−0.01	0.05
	Social incompetence×insight	0.04	0.02	1.69	.092	−0.01	0.09

SE: Standard error, CI: Confidence interval, p<.01

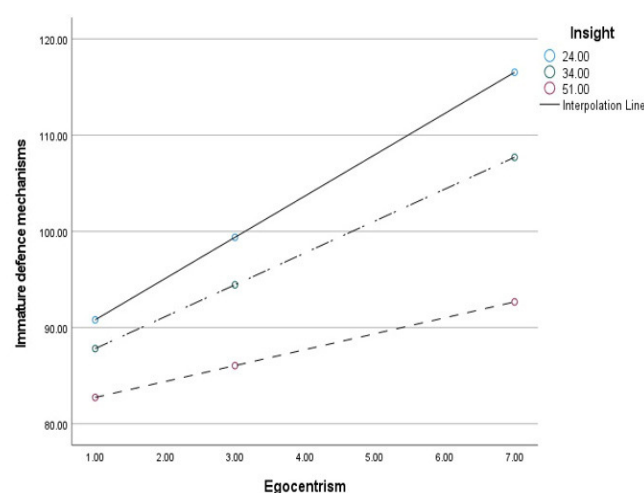
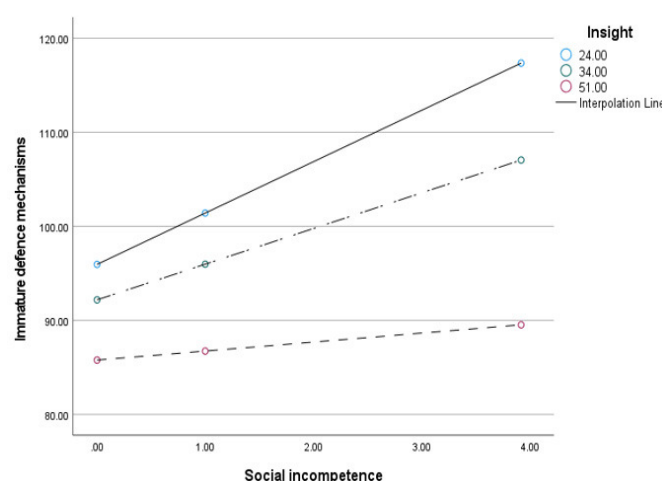
($B=-0.10$, $SE=0.03$, $t=-2.95$, $p=.003$, 95% CI $[-0.16, -0.03]$). Similarly, the interaction between social inadequacy and insight was significant ($B=-0.17$, $SE=0.06$, $t=-2.90$, $p=.004$, 95% CI $[-0.28, -0.05]$). These results indicate that as insight increases, the impact of egocentrism and social incompetence on immature defense mechanisms decreases. However, no significant interactions were found for alienation ($p=.099$) or insecure attachment ($p=.078$) in predicting immature defenses.

In the neurotic defenses model, none of the interactions between insight and object relations variables reached statistical significance: alienation ($p=.613$), insecure attachment ($p=.751$), egocentrism ($p=.603$), and social inadequacy ($p=.527$). This indicates that insight does not moderate the relationship between object relations and neurotic defenses.

Similarly, in the mature defenses model, no significant moderation effects were found. Interactions between insight and alienation ($p=.341$), insecure attachment ($p=.103$), egocentrism ($p=.153$), and social inadequacy ($p=.920$) were all nonsignificant.

Taken together, these findings suggest that insight plays a significant moderating role only in the context of immature defenses, specifically when interacting with egocentrism and social incompetence. No moderating effect of insight was observed for neurotic or mature defense styles.

Figure 1, 2 visually illustrate the moderating effect of insight. In **Figure 1**, the interaction graph indicates that among individuals with low levels of insight, increases in egocentrism are associated with substantial increases in immature defense use. However, among those with higher levels of insight, this relationship is substantially attenuated—almost disappearing—suggesting that insight may serve as a

**Figure 1.** The moderation of insight in the relationship between egocentrism and immature defense mechanisms**Figure 2.** The moderation of insight in the relationship between social incompetence and immature defense mechanisms

protective factor against the maladaptive impact of egocentric tendencies.

Similarly, **Figure 2** shows that among individuals with low insight, elevated levels of social incompetence correspond with greater reliance on immature defenses. However, at higher insight levels, this relationship is markedly weaker. These patterns support the interpretation that insight may contribute to a more adaptive defensive profile by buffering the effects of maladaptive object relational patterns, particularly those involving egocentrism and social incompetence.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that insight plays a significant moderating role in the relationship between specific dimensions of object relations and defense mechanisms. In particular, it was found that maladaptive relational patterns—such as egocentrism and social inadequacy—are associated with increased use of immature (primitive) defense mechanisms. However, this association becomes significantly weaker in individuals with higher levels of insight. In essence, the greater the individual's insight, the less likely it is that internalized self-centered or socially insecure representations will lead to primitive forms of psychological defense. This finding suggests that insight may serve a protective function in the regulation of psychological responses and adjustment.

Conversely, the study did not find a significant moderating effect of insight in relation to neurotic or mature defense mechanisms. The influence of object relations on the use of these defense styles appeared stable across varying levels of insight. This pattern implies that insight exerts its moderating effect primarily within the domain of primitive defenses and may be less decisive for more structured or adaptive forms of defense.

Recent studies have reported similar dynamics between insight, defense mechanisms, and emotional functioning. For example, Bilge and Bilge¹⁶ found that individuals with high levels of alexithymia were more prone to psychological symptoms such as anxiety and depression. Their findings revealed that while primitive defenses mediated the relationship in a maladaptive direction, insight operated as a protective mediator. That is, as alexithymia increased the severity of symptoms, primitive defenses reinforced this effect, whereas higher levels of insight served to mitigate it. These findings are consistent with our interpretation that insight serves a protective function. In a recent study,¹⁷ the quality of object relations was found to influence narcissistic personality features both directly and indirectly through the mediation of defense mechanisms. This result supports the relationship identified in our study between egocentrism and immature defenses: grandiosity and lack of empathy—hallmarks of narcissistic organization—are largely sustained through primitive defenses such as splitting and denial. However, when individuals develop insight into these dynamics, their defensive functioning may shift toward a more mature level.

Adopting a perspective that closely aligns with our own, a study involving patients diagnosed with clinical depression examined the associations among attachment style,

mentalization capacity, and defense mechanisms.¹⁸ The findings indicated that individuals with secure attachment and higher levels of mentalization employed more mature defense strategies, whereas those with insecure attachment and limited mentalization capacity tended to rely more on neurotic and primitive defenses. Furthermore, the study showed that individuals with strong mentalization skills exhibited higher levels of overall defensive functioning, reflecting more adaptive strategies for managing internal psychological conflicts. These findings support the notion that both insight and mentalization can facilitate a transition toward more mature and adaptive defensive functioning.

However, the same study also found that insight did not mediate the relationship between insecure attachment or alienation and defensive functioning. Alienation is typically characterized by a disruption in the experience of self and others, manifesting as isolation and emotional detachment. This phenomenon may be primarily attributed to low mentalization capacity—for instance, difficulties in recognizing or understanding others' mental and emotional states. In states of internal disconnection, diminished reflective capacity may hinder the individual's ability to utilize insight in an active and transformative manner. Therefore, the moderating effect of insight may be limited in the presence of alienation. At this point, distinguishing between the constructs of insight and mentalization becomes particularly relevant. Insight generally refers to an individual's ability to recognize and understand their internal motives, emotions, and behaviors, whereas mentalization entails the capacity to comprehend both one's own and others' mental states. Although both involve reflective functioning, mentalization carries a broader interpersonal focus. While insight primarily encompasses cognitive awareness of internal processes, mentalization integrates emotional and relational understanding. The capacity to mentalize involves not only an understanding of the self but also an appreciation of others' intentions, rendering it a more relational and interactive process.¹⁹

In another study conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic,²⁰ the relationships among personality traits, defense mechanisms, mentalization capacity, and trust in vaccination were examined as predictors of individuals' adaptation to pandemic-related stress. The results showed that individuals who exhibited immature defenses and weak mentalization abilities were more prone to maladaptive responses, including susceptibility to conspiracy theories during lockdown periods. Additionally, it was found that the emotional distress resulting from dysfunctional personality traits was largely shaped by defense mechanisms, whereas mentalization capacity functioned as a protective factor, promoting more adaptive behaviors. These findings offer empirical support for our conclusion that higher levels of insight are associated with a reduction in the use of primitive defenses.

As the ability to understand oneself and others (i.e., mentalization capacity) increases, individuals tend to respond to stressors in a more realistic and flexible manner. Conversely, low mentalization capacity may trigger primitive defenses, thereby impairing adaptive functioning.²¹ In light

of these findings, it becomes essential to consider the clinical implications of our results in the context of psychotherapy.

Psychodynamic therapy approaches have long emphasized insight as a central mechanism of therapeutic change. In this framework, the client's ability to recognize internal conflicts and repetitive relational patterns is considered crucial for symptom resolution. As indicated by our findings, insight can play a significant role in transforming egocentric perspectives and feelings of interpersonal inadequacy, thereby reducing the reliance on primitive defenses. Given the inverse association we observed between insight and immature defenses, facilitating the development of insight should be a core component of the therapeutic process.

Therapeutic models such as transference-focused psychotherapy and mentalization-based therapy are particularly aligned with this goal. These approaches aim to increase clients' awareness of their own mental states through the therapeutic relationship, enabling them to recognize and modify primitive defenses and develop a more cohesive sense of self.^{22,23} In line with our findings, it is evident that therapists should formulate clinical interventions according to the client's level of insight. For individuals with low levels of insight and a tendency to use primitive defenses, a more supportive and structured therapeutic stance may be necessary. As insight increases, therapists can adopt a more interpretive and exploratory role. The hierarchical organization of defense mechanisms also plays a critical role;²⁴ when individuals are capable of employing mature defenses—a marker of both greater insight and ego strength—therapeutic collaboration becomes more effective, allowing deeper exploration of early developmental conflicts.

Limitations

This study is limited to individuals aged between 18 and 65, and participants with self-reported psychiatric diagnoses were excluded. Additionally, the study relied exclusively on self-report measures, which may be subject to various forms of bias due to participants' subjective perceptions. In particular, the tendency toward social desirability may lead individuals to present themselves in a more favorable light, potentially distorting their responses. This poses a methodological limitation, especially when assessing inherently subjective constructs such as insight and defense mechanisms. Future studies could enhance the reliability and generalizability of findings by increasing the sample size and incorporating clinician-administered interviews or observer-rated instruments.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the moderating role of insight in the relationship between object relations and defense mechanisms in adulthood. Specifically, insight appears to shield individuals from falling into maladaptive patterns characterized by primitive defenses, by enhancing their capacity to understand themselves and others more clearly.

Developing insight enables individuals to break free from automatic and rigid defensive responses and instead choose more flexible and mature ways of managing internal and

interpersonal challenges. Consequently, psychotherapeutic interventions—whether rooted in psychodynamic, cognitive, or integrative frameworks—that aim to deepen self-understanding and reflective capacity can be instrumental in promoting psychological resilience and growth.

By supporting clients in developing insight into their internal world, therapists help them dismantle the rigid structures of primitive defenses and replace them with more adaptive coping strategies. In doing so, insight becomes the key turning point in breaking the pathological cycle between distorted object relations and dysfunctional defense organization. Therefore, the goal of psychotherapy should extend beyond symptom relief to include the facilitation of insight and emotional integration, laying the foundation for more stable and mature psychological functioning.

ETHICAL DECLARATIONS

Ethics Committee Approval

The study was carried out with the permission of Ankara Hacı Bayram Veli University Ethics Committee (Date: 30.05.2025, Decision No: 355042).

Informed Consent

All participants signed free of charge and informed consent form.

Referee Evaluation Process

Externally peer-reviewed

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Financial Disclosure

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Author Contributions

The author declares that they participated in the design, execution, and analysis of the manuscript and approved its final version.

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